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BEGINNINGS OF McKENZIE HIGHWAY, 1862¹

By ROBERT W. SAWYER

JOHN TEMPLETON CRAIG was born in Wooster, Ohio, in March, 1822. He came to Oregon in 1852 and in the next year to Lane County, settling on Camp Creek in the McKenzie Valley. What his occupation was in those early days I have been unable to discover. He was one of the number employed by Felix Scott, Jr., in the epic first crossing of the Cascade Range with cattle and wagons in this vicinity in the summer of 1862. The experience gave color and direction to the rest of his life. Thenceforth he was a man with a single purpose—to see a road built through this mountain pass that would make travel easier, a purpose that has actuated many another highway enthusiast down to the present day.

The Scott family had come from Missouri to Oregon by the way of California in 1845 and 1846. The head of the family, Felix Scott, Sr., was a man of prominence and substance. He served as sub-agent of Indian affairs for southwestern Oregon and had business interests in California and Oregon. Early in the sixties gold was discovered in the Florence district of Idaho and Felix Scott, Jr., undoubtedly acquainted with the business of supplying the miners of California with the necessities of life, conceived the idea of a like activity in Idaho. His plan involved the crossing of the Cascade Range at this point by following the McKenzie River into the mountains and then striking boldly over the range. At that time the eastern terminus of the road running up the river from Springfield was the "rock house," a natural rock formation making a sort of rude shelter beside the road about four miles east of the present community of Vida. From that point the indomitable Scott and his party, said to consist of 50 to 60 men, hacked their way east through the thick forest, up the steep mountain slopes and past these jagged and difficult lava fields. The task consumed the whole summer season. It was not until fall that the 900 head of cattle and the nine wagons of supplies were

¹Address at the dedication of the John Templeton Craig monument, McKenzie Pass, July 13, 1930.

over the summit and on their way into the open pines of the eastern slope. The party wintered on Trout Creek in what is now Jefferson County and in 1863 resumed its progress, going, however, to Boise instead of Florence.

With this memorable passage of the Cascade Range accomplished and his party established on Trout Creek for the winter, Felix Scott returned to Eugene City. He had demonstrated the possibility of this new route to central and eastern Oregon and now planned to develop it. This is shown by his associating himself with John Coggsell, John Powell, S. Ellsworth, and his brother, Marion Scott, in "The McKenzie Fork Wagon Road Company." The articles of incorporation, dated and filed in the Lane County records on December 20, 1862, state the purpose of the company to be "to construct its said road from the eastern terminus of the county road near John Latta's about 16 miles east of Eugene City, thence easterly along the nearest and best route across the Cascade mountains by way of Canon City to Auburn in Baker County." This may have been solely for the purpose of providing capital for the undertaking or it may have been planned to secure by the collection of tolls such further advantage as might accrue from the construction of a road over the mountains. There is no record of tolls collected, however, and apparently the company ceased its activity after a year had passed for we find on December 18, 1863, another company in the field. This was the "McKenzie Wagon Road Company" whose articles were filed on that day by Henry C. Owens, Charles A. Williams, Norris Humphrey, Riley E. Stratton, Jonathan Keeney, Matthew W. Mitchell, Charles C. Croner and Eugene F. Skinner. This company proposed to build a "waggon" road "from Eugene City, Lane County, Oregon, by way of the valley of the McKenzie River and the most feasible pass over the Cascade Range near the Three Sisters Mountains to the Des Chutes River, at the point known as the 'Ford' on the Wiley Pass road." A third group to form a corporation for a like purpose was composed of George Millican, William Y. Miller, J. M. Dick and James W. Gay. On September 25, 1865, they filed articles for the "McKenzie Valley and Des Chutes wagon road company," proposing to construct "its said road from

Robert Millican's by way of the valley of the McKenzie and the most feasible pass of the Cascade Mountains north of the Three Sisters to the crossing of the Des Chutes above the mouth of the Crooked River."

These records have considerable value to us today. They refer to the beginnings of the McKenzie highway. They point to the interest taken in the Eugene City of that time in the development of this route. They tell us who were some of the leaders in these movements and what the localities east of the mountains to which access was sought.

In none of these early companies do we find the name of John T. Craig but fortunately we know something of him and his activities from other sources. All agree that during these years his sole occupation was the building of the McKenzie road. Following the Scott crossing of 1862 Craig had built a cabin at what is now McKenzie bridge and from that point as his headquarters he worked on the road. Sometimes he had assistance, sometimes he worked alone, sometimes he had a grub stake from friends on the McKenzie; more often his only support was his own unflagging interest and enthusiasm. He is described as a strange character; some of his contemporaries thought he was demented. He is said sometimes to have stayed in a hollow cedar upriver from the "rock house" known as "Craig's bedroom." His home was at the point where the road crossed the river at Craig's, now McKenzie, bridge and the clearing nearby was called Craig's pasture.

Now the Scott trail of 1862 had followed the river up to the "Salt Springs," later to be known by the name of Belknap, and had thence taken its course to the east on the north side of Deer Butte. To avoid the lava fields it had swung south from Scott Lake and, turning east again, skirted them on an old Indian trail. It was a difficult route. Scott, it is reported, at times was forced to use as many as 26 yoke of oxen to one wagon to surmount the grades. A search was made for an easier route, and in 1866 John Latta discovered Lost Creek canyon. The road was carried through it and up Dead Horse hill to the lava fields and then a way picked out across them on which the trail was built, rough and tortuous, but 1000 feet lower in elevation than the Scott trail.

John Craig was at work on this route in the late 1860s, pushing it up towards the summit while such travel as there was continued to use the old Scott trail. At the same time there were others who apparently were seeking to secure this road development through organization for we find filed on February 8, 1870, the articles of incorporation of "the Lost Creek and Desshuts wagon road company," the incorporators being G. C. Clark, J. W. Page and S. Osborn. In the description of the route reference is made to "the bridge across the McKenzie known as Craig's Bridge." The road was to run "through the low pass north of the Three Sisters." In that same year, on December 24, John M. Thompson, John Whiteaker and J. J. Walton, Jr., filed articles for the "McKenzie River Military Road Company." Its road was to run "by way of the most eligible pass over the Cascade mountains to intersect the Willamette Valley and Cascade Mountain wagon road at a point at or near the west end of Ochoco Valley in Crooked River." In 1870, also, the Oregon legislature by joint resolution urged a land grant for a military wagon road along the McKenzie River.

Such competition for dominance over the McKenzie route as these activities may indicate must have been short lived for no further reference to these companies appears. Instead we find John T. Craig at last at the goal of his ambition and at the head of a wagon road company that was to control this McKenzie road for nearly 25 years. On January 14, 1871, articles of incorporation of the "McKenzie Salt Springs and Des Chutes Wagon Road Company" were filed by M. H. Harlow, P. C. Renfrew, J. T. Craig and A. Renfrew. "The enterprise in which this corporation purposes to engage," to quote from the articles, "is that of constructing a clay wagon road from the terminus of the present county road at Clarks point on the north side of the McKenzie River in Lane County, Oregon, thence up the north side of said river to the point known as Craigs Bridge, thence across said river and by way of Lost Creek and through the low pass to the Des Chutes River at a point near the north end of the Paulina Mountains."

How soon after the company was incorporated travel over its road was made possible does not appear. With the articles are filed records of the receipts and disbursements of the road

company. The first of these covers the period from November 8, 1872 to December 3, 1873, and it seems reasonable to conclude that the road was not open for travel much before the fall of 1872. Receipts for the period were \$219.62 and disbursements \$714.25, but of greater interest is the fact that this first report was signed by John T. Craig, as president of the company. Craig's name also appears in the record of disbursements, others to which payments were made being J. H. Belknap, W. W. Craig, P. C. Renfrew, M. Fountain and George Millican.

Except for two years these accounts were filed annually until 1894. Craig's name is not found after the first account. Instead there appear the names of A. S. Powers, George Millican, A. G. Hovey, W. R. Walker, A. V. Peters and George A. Dorris as officers and directors while as toll collectors appear A. S. Powers, M. G. McCarty, J. W. Wycoff, G. O. Powers, J. R. Atkinson and a Mr. Hill. Until 1891 tolls were collected at McKenzie bridge—no longer called Craig's bridge. In 1891, 1892 and 1893 the collection was at Blue River and in 1894, the last year of tolls, to quote from the report—"at the gate." The county records fail to show the schedule of toll charges but I have been told that the rate for a wagon drawn by two horses was \$2. For four horses the charge was \$2.50, for a horseman \$1 and for a pack horse 50 cents. The toll for loose horses and cattle was 10 cents a head and for sheep five cents. The toll collectors were ordinarily paid \$150 for a season's work. In the 22 years in which tolls were collected by the McKenzie Salt Springs and Deschutes Wagon Road Company (saving the years 1881 and 1883 for which no report was filed) the company took in \$17,969.50 and disbursed \$19,046.87.

At the same time that the building of a road over the Cascades by way of the McKenzie River was interesting various residents of Lane County like interest was being taken in Linn County in a road into central Oregon by way of the Santiam River. To build such a road there was originated at Lebanon in May, 1864, the Willamette Valley and Cascade Mountain Wagon Road Company. We know that even at that time there was some sort of road on the route proposed because the Lane County incorporators of the McKenzie River Wagon Road

Company of December, 1863, proposed to build to the ford on the Wiley pass road and the Wiley pass road could have been none other than that on the route discovered in 1859 by Andrew Wiley. This was the South Santiam and the ford was the ford on the Deschutes River.

The Linn County company finished its improvement of the Wiley pass road in 1865 and 1866 and thereafter for many years it was an important route of travel from the valley to central Oregon and beyond. The road had a long and interesting history—a history that touches much of the settlement of the Ochoco and Crooked River valleys, the building, so far as it went, of the ill-fated Hogg railroad, and many years of litigation and federal land office activity over the land grant that the company obtained. None of this is pertinent to our subject, and for present purposes it is important to remember only that the road was open and in use in the summer of 1865.

For some time previous to that year the Indians of the eastern Oregon country had been causing trouble. In 1864 a treaty had been made with the Klamaths, the Modocs and the Yahooskin band of the Snakes, but other Snakes were still in the field. In eastern Oregon in 1865 the roads were unsafe because of Indian raids and when George B. Currey was assigned to the command of the department of the Pacific on August 8, 1865, he planned at once a winter campaign to end these Indian depredations. Nine sites for winter camps were selected; one of these was on the Santiam road not far from its junction with the McKenzie and about three miles northeast of the present town of Sisters. To this point in the late summer of 1865 came a detachment of Company A, United States Army Volunteers. The party was under the command of Captain Charles LaFollette and it traveled from the Willamette Valley to this point over the Santiam road. The post was given the name of the county from which LaFollette came—Polk.

Before the winter campaign could be undertaken orders were received to muster out the volunteers, the program was given up and the camps were abandoned. The detachment at Camp Polk stayed in winter quarters there until the spring of 1866 when the soldiers left for their homes. The importance of this incident is that it gave a name to a locality, and when Samuel M.

W. Hindman settled in 1870 across the road from the cabins left by the volunteer soldiers and soon after successfully applied for the establishment of a postoffice at that point and his own appointment as postmaster the name given was Camp Polk. He was appointed postmaster in 1875. The office was abandoned in 1888 and the business transferred to Sisters.

With the establishment of the Camp Polk postoffice and the opening of the McKenzie road came the letting of a contract to carry mails from Eugene City to Prineville by way of Camp Polk. At a later date the route was extended to Mitchell. One of the early mail contractors was A. S. Powers who was also an officer of the road company and a toll collector. Whether Craig was still connected with the company in 1877 does not appear but late in that year, when he was 56 years old, Powers employed him to carry the mails over that part of the contract route lying between McKenzie bridge and Camp Polk.

It was just after Christmas that Craig started for Camp Polk with his sack of mail. When several weeks had elapsed and he had not returned friends made inquiry of the postmaster at Camp Polk and learned that he had never reached that spot. This exchange of messages took place over the roundabout route between Eugene and Camp Polk by way of Portland, The Dalles and Prineville and it was six weeks after Craig's departure before searching parties took the trail to find him. After one unsuccessful attempt, a party reached the lonely cabin in the lava fields and on entering found Craig's body lying in the ashes of the fireplace with a quilt drawn over him. On the bare earth floor nearby were matches but none would strike. The surmise is that Craig reached the cabin in an exhausted condition, possibly got a fire burning in the fireplace and fell asleep without restoring his matches to their case. Later, waking, he found the fire out and the matches too damp to strike, whereupon he sought warmth in the ashes of the dead fire and there froze to death. The body was buried in the snow nearby the cabin and in the following spring, when the snows had melted, it was given a more permanent burial and covered with rocks from nearby. The present grave and monument beside the McKenzie highway are in the place where the first grave was dug.

The cabin has disappeared but a few stones still mark the fire-place where the body was found.

It remains only to conclude the story of the McKenzie road. The company continued the collection of tolls and the maintenance of the road into the 1890s. Apparently the report filed for 1894 marked the end. Thereafter the company gave up its undertaking and the road became anybody's and nobody's. It was not to continue in this uncertain state for long, for in 1896 the section from the rock house to Belknap Springs was made a county road and in 1898 the last step was taken. In that year on July 7, George Ward led in a petition to the county court that the road east from the springs, given now the name "the McKenzie and Eastern Oregon" be taken over by the county. On the petition A. S. Powers, John A. Isham and J. H. Belknap, were appointed as viewers, and the road was surveyed by C. M. Collier with J. W. Eyler and Clarence Thompson as chain bearers and Ira Isham and Irwin Sims as markers.

The findings of the viewers are worth recording. It was their opinion that the road "is an important artery of travel for Lane County, being almost the main thoroughfare to Eastern Oregon, that the route has been carefully selected and the road constructed at large expense by the old toll road company and said company has now relinquished all control and care of it and unless the county takes control and care of it will fall into decay and destruction and be lost to the public."

The report of the viewers was accepted by the court and the McKenzie and Eastern Oregon road became a part of the road system of Lane County. It has since become the McKenzie highway and a unit of the highway system of the state of Oregon.